

## Won't I Be Your Neighbor?

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 20, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37, NRSV)*

Didn't you just love that? "Chico the Good Samaritan"! I had never heard that children's song before, but it's really perfect. In preparing for today's message on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and knowing that we would hear the choir sing, my mind went to *another* children's song, or at least the theme for a beloved children's TV show which was one of the most popular and memorable of its kind in broadcasting history.

You know it:

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,  
A beautiful day for a neighbor.  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

*It's a neighborly day in this beauty wood,  
A neighborly day for a beauty,  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

*I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you,  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.  
So let's make the most of this beautiful day,  
Since we're together we might as well say,*

*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?  
Won't you please, won't you please?  
Please won't you be my neighbor?  
[Hello, neighbor!]*

Of course, I'm talking about "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," that wonderful show hosted by the beloved TV personality (and Presbyterian minister!) Fred Rogers. In his own deeply sincere way, he taught a generation of children (and their parents) about welcoming others regardless of who they are or what they look like, and so building a true community of neighbors. In this, Mister Rogers was expressing his simple and beautiful faith, with love of God and love of neighbor at the center of it.

But hard as it may be to grasp now, Mister Rogers was not without his detractors. It seems that such openness is controversial in some quarters, and in this, Mister Rogers found even more common ground with his ultimate Boss. Jesus, too, understood that there is no love of God without love of neighbor, which may seem simple and obvious enough, but as Jesus knew all too well, there's nothing quite like *religion* finding a way to screw that up.

Today we conclude our worship and sermon series on the parables, having found them to offer us much more than meets the eye. Some have seemed to have an obvious meaning, at least until we start digging and find additional ways of understanding them. Others have been difficult from the start, with their riches obscured by historical and cultural subtleties. And then there's *this* one, a story we've heard all our lives, seemingly offering a simple answer to what *should* be a simple question: "Who is my neighbor?"

We know from the lead up to the parable that Jesus is being challenged, tested, by one whose narrow world is threatened by Jesus' expansive vision of who God loves, and by extension, whom we are called to love. We're not sure of the exact motivation for the lawyer's original question about inheriting eternal life, but Jesus – as he so often does – turns the question back on the questioner, having this legal eagle express with his *own lips* the sacred center of the Divine will, that we love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind; AND that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

As soon as this lawyer voices those timeless words, he *knows*. He knows that they reveal the reach of his concern as far too small, and he knows that Jesus knows it too. And so, he seeks to "justify" himself ... to save face ... to find that legal loophole which would allow him to escape the clear implications of what he really already knows to be true. And so, he asks, "Who is my neighbor?", desperately hoping to pull this young rabbi into an academic debate which he's pretty sure he'd have the upper hand in.

But Jesus is not interested in an academic debate. He tells a *story* instead – a story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was assaulted and robbed by criminals, who beat him to an inch of his life, stripped him of his possessions, and ran off, leaving him for dead.

One might imagine him lucky that two religious types, a priest and a Levite in turn, would be walking that way that day and see him. Surely, they of all people know what ought to be done here ... that the way of God is compassion ... but amazingly, they pass on by – remaining on or even *moving to* the other side of the road, no less! – without helping the poor man. It appears that they are concerned to retain their ritual purity, lest they handle what, as far as they're concerned, may be a dead body and so become "unclean."

But then a third man comes along – a Samaritan. He's a religious and ethnic minority looked down upon and scorned by the Jewish community of the time. Someone not trusted ... someone who wouldn't be believed ... someone whose identity and story would be invisible to good, proper people like religiously observant Jews.

But as he comes near, he sees this man, this Jew, who has been beaten and robbed and left for dead, and he is moved to compassion. And he goes to him and begins to treat and bandage his wounds, gives him water to drink, and puts him up on his donkey and carries him to a traveler's inn, where he takes care of him all night – and all for a man who would not likely have done the same if their roles were reversed.

The following day, this Samaritan takes out two denarii (the equivalent of two full days' wages for a laborer) and gives them to the innkeeper for the man's care, promising to return and repay the innkeeper for any additional expenses he incurs.

The story now complete, Jesus turns back to the lawyer, and he asks him a final question ... a simple one, but one that completely flips the script: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

Do you notice what Jesus is doing here? The lawyer's question which prompted the story was "Who is my neighbor?" He wanted to pull Jesus into establishing a definition of who his neighbor *is* ... the standing of someone else ... and therefore, of who has a rightful claim to his concern. Maybe they do, or maybe they don't. Maybe someone who believes a different way, or talks a different way, or lives a different way *merits* his care, or maybe they *don't*. The lawyer might think it fun to haggle over the arguments one way or the other.

But again, Jesus doesn't fall for it, refusing to get pulled into such a debate on those terms. Instead, he concludes the story and again answers the lawyer's question with one of his own, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?", forcing the lawyer to face the truth that as we confront the commandment of God there are, finally, no legal evasions possible.

Which of these three did the will of God and so acted *as a neighbor* towards the one in need? The answer is obvious, and the lawyer knows it: "The one who showed him mercy." To which Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise." That is, you go and you *be* a neighbor, and so embody the will and love of God.

You see, the question of who *someone else* is ... whether someone else is, or isn't, my neighbor and thereby is, or isn't, the proper focus of my care and concern ... is the wrong question, and it always has been. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, it is "the question in which disobedience justifies itself. The answer is: *You yourself are the neighbor*. Go and be obedient in acts of love ..."

In the end, Jesus would have us see that it all comes squarely back to us, not to first figure out the status of others ("Who are *they*?"), as if the divine command binding on us depended on the answer, but for us to confront the far more fundamental question: Who am *I*? Not "Are *they* really our neighbors?" but rather, "*Are we neighbors* to those within our reach?" It's not about others' worthiness or unworthiness at all, and not our job to judge, but solely about who *we* are and who *we* are going to be – the neighbors God calls us to be.

And so, you see, Mister Rogers understood. His simple and beautiful question "Won't you be my neighbor?" is truly an *invitation* into a *relationship*. "Won't you be my neighbor?" is an invitation to others, and if we need to hear it, it is a *challenge* to ourselves, "Won't *I* be *your* neighbor? Won't *we* be *their* neighbors?" It is an invitation *to* neighbors – *from* neighbors.

Little by little, one heart at a time, this is how we build a more beautiful day in the neighborhood – to the glory of God! Amen.